



Press release

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Restitution to Nigeria: Swiss museums return 18 major artefacts

Lagos, 29 June 2026 – Eighteen artefacts from the Kingdom of Benin have been returned to Nigeria by three Swiss museums. The courtly and religious objects are among the famous ‘Benin Bronzes’, which were looted from the Kingdom of Benin – in modern-day Nigeria – at the end of the 19th century. Switzerland also returned to Nigeria five artefacts seized in this country. During the restitution ceremony, Federal Councillor Elisabeth Baume-Schneider and Nigeria’s minister of culture, Hannatu Musa Musawa, signed an agreement on the transfer of cultural property, with the aim of combating the illicit trade in cultural property and protecting cultural heritage.

At a ceremony at the National Museum in Lagos, the National Commission for Museums and Monuments (NCMM), on behalf of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, formally received 18 artefacts from the Kingdom of Benin. Fourteen of these come from the Ethnographic Museum at the University of Zurich, two from Museum Rietberg Zurich and two from the Musée d’Ethnographie de Genève (MEG). The artefacts are among the famous ‘Benin Bronzes’, which were created at the royal court of Benin – in modern-day Nigeria – from the 16th century onwards. Cast in metal or carved from ivory, these objects were used to represent and venerate ancestors, and to perform political functions.

The restitution follows several years of collaborative provenance research carried out under the Benin Initiative Switzerland, which showed that the objects were most likely looted from the Kingdom of Benin during the British attack in 1897. They would then have entered the art market and found their way into museums around the world. The ceremony also included the restitution of a bronze bracelet and four archaeological monoliths from Nigeria’s Niger Delta region seized in Switzerland as part of criminal proceedings and subsequently transferred to the state. Switzerland has now fulfilled its legal obligation to return them to their country of origin, the Federal Republic of Nigeria.

Agreement on preventing the illicit transfer of cultural property

During the restitution ceremony, Swiss Federal Councillor Elisabeth Baume-Schneider and Honourable Minister Hannatu Musa Musawa, Nigeria’s Minister of Art, Culture and the Creative Economy, signed an international agreement on the import, export and repatriation of cultural property, strengthening cooperation between Switzerland and Nigeria in the field of the protection of cultural heritage. The agreement sets out a legal framework for cooperation aimed at preventing the illicit trafficking of cultural property, facilitating the return of unlawfully exported cultural objects, and strengthening the exchange of information,

expertise and best practices between Switzerland and Nigeria. The restitution of the artefacts and the agreement on future cooperation form part of a broader effort to address historical injustice, while creating the basis for long-term cultural partnership.

The future of the returned cultural property in Nigeria

The returned artefacts are part of the historical memory, spiritual life, artistic heritage and identity of the communities from which they originate. Their restitution enables Nigerian institutions, researchers, artists, students and the wider public to study, preserve and interpret this heritage in Nigeria and on Nigeria's own terms. Some of the returned artefacts will be on display at the National Museum in Lagos, while the vast majority will return to their original home in Edo State, where they will be safely and temporarily stored in the Oba Ovonramwen Storage facility at the National Museum in Benin City. The NCMM plans to establish a world-class gallery to display all the recently returned Benin Artefacts, which will include not only the Swiss returns but also the artefacts returned last year from the Netherlands and the expected Cambridge returns.

The ceremony was attended by Honourable Minister Hannatu Musa Musawa, Nigeria's Minister of Art, Culture, Tourism and the Creative Economy; Swiss Federal Councillor Elisabeth Baume-Schneider; Olugbile Holloway, Director General of the NCMM; representatives of the Swiss Federal Office of Culture and the directors of the three Swiss museums returning the artefacts: Professor Dr Alice Hertzog, Director of the Ethnographic Museum at the University of Zurich; Dr Annette Bhagwati, Director of Museum Rietberg Zurich; and Dr Carine Ayélé Durand, Director of the MEG.

Benin Initiative Switzerland

The Benin Initiative Switzerland was launched in 2021 and led by Museum Rietberg, with the participation of eight Swiss museums and in close collaboration with Nigerian partners. Supported by the Swiss Federal Office of Culture, the project investigated the provenance of Benin artefacts held in Swiss collections, and its findings formed the basis for the decisions regarding restitution taken by the University of Zurich, the City of Zurich on behalf of Museum Rietberg, and the City of Geneva on behalf of the Musée d'Ethnographie de Genève. The transfer of ownership concerned 28 objects in total and was signed on 20 March 2026. Nine works will remain in Switzerland on loan at the Museum Rietberg and one at MEG. The working relationships established through the Benin Initiative also helped build the trust and mutual understanding that contributed to the agreement on the transfer of cultural property between Switzerland and Nigeria.

Further information:

- [Photos](#)
- Information from the Federal Office of Culture on [transfer of cultural property](#)
- [National Commission for Museums and Monuments Nigeria](#)
- [Ethnographic Museum at the University of Zurich](#)
- [Benin Initiative Switzerland - Museum Rietberg](#)
- [Museum Rietberg](#)
- [Biens culturels spoliés restitués au Nigéria | Musée d'ethnographie de Genève](#)

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